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CALIFORNIA

BY

INA COOLBRITH

SAN FRANCISCO
THE BOOK CLUB OF CALIFORNIA
MDCCCCXVIII

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JOHN HENRY NASH, SAN FRANCISCO
DECORATIONS BY LAWRENCE B. HASTE
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I HAVE *always believed that the Poet of the New World—of the World—was to come out of the West—from California. Why not? Would it be more strange that this broad land by the shores of the vast Pacific should produce the Supreme Singer, than that a little Island of the far Atlantic should have given birth to the Bard of Avon—to that kinglier brow than ever wore a crown?*

For California is a Poem! The land of romance, of mystery, of worship, of beauty and of Song. It chants from her snow-crested, cloud-bannered mountain-ranges; it hymns thro' her forests of sky-reaching pine and sequoia; it ripples in her flowered and fruited valleys; it thunders from her fountains pouring, as it were, from the very waters above the firmament; it anthems from the deeps of the mightiest ocean of the world; and echoes ever in the syllables of her own strangely beautiful name,—California.

The spell of enchantment which she wove about me from the day when—a little child—I entered her borders thro' the rocky mountain-pass from the long trail across the great plains, was not lessened by the after-

vision of the Southland grape and fig, orange and pomegranate,—or the (so-called) deserts of sand and cacti, which the spring months covered with a carpet of bloom rivalling the richest dyes of the Persian looms. Rather has it increased with the passing of time.

And then she is, as our brothers of France would say, of such a Bigness; is so stupendous! Surely, of her, greatness only should be born: why not the greatest of all,—the Master Singer?

With all this mind-enwoven, it was but natural, when in after years I was asked by the University of California to contribute a poem for its Commencement Day, that I should seek to voice my belief. How inadequate the expression to the inner song only I may fully realize. Yet am I glad that the first Commencement Poem to be written by a woman for any university, is of, and bears the name of California.

INA COOLBRITH.

WAS *it the sigh and shiver of the leaves?*
Was it the murmur of the meadow brook,
That in and out the reeds and water weeds
Slipped silverly, and on their tremulous keys
Uttered her many melodies? Or voice
Of the far sea, red with the sunset gold,
That sang within her shining shores, and sang
Within the Gate, that in the sunset shone
A gate of fire against the outer world?

FOR, *ever as I turned the magic page*
Of that old song the old, blind singer sang
Unto the world, when it and song were young—
The ripple of the reeds, or odorous,
Soft sigh of leaves, or voice of the far sea—
A mystical, low murmur, tremulous
Upon the wind, came in with musk of rose,
The salt breath of the waves, and far, faint smell
Of laurel up the slopes of Tamalpais. . . .

"Am I less fair, am I less fair than these,
Daughters of far-off seas?
Daughters of far-off shores,—bleak, over-blown
With foam of fretful tides, with wail and moan
Of waves, that toss wild hands, that clasp and beat
Wild, desolate hands above the lonely sands,
Printed no more with pressure of their feet:
That chase no more the light feet flying swift
Up golden sands, nor lift
Foam fingers white unto their garment hem,
And flowing hair of them.

"For these are dead: the fair, great queens are dead!
The long hair's gold a dust the wind bloweth
Wherever it may list;
The curvëd lips, that kissed
Heroes and kings of men, a dust that breath,
Nor speech, nor laughter, ever quickeneth;
And all the glory sped

From the large, marvelous eyes, the light whereof
Wrought wonder in their hearts,—desire, and love!
And wrought not any good:
But strife, and curses of the gods, and flood,
And fire and battle-death!
Am I less fair, less fair,
Because that my hands bear
Neither a sword, nor any flaming brand,
To blacken and make desolate my land,
But on my brows are leaves of olive boughs,
And in mine arms a dove!

"Sea-born and goddess, blossom of the foam,
Pale Aphrodite, shadowy as a mist
Not any sun hath kissed!
Tawny of limb I roam,
The dusks of forests dark within my hair;
The far Yosemite,
For garment and for covering of me,

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"HEARKEN, *how many years*
I sat alone, I sat alone and heard
Only the silence stirred
By wind and leaf, by clash of grassy spears,
And singing bird that called to singing bird.
Heard but the savage tongue
Of my brown savage children, that among
The hills and valleys chased the buck and doe,
And round the wigwam fires
Chanted wild songs of their wild savage sires,
And danced their wild, weird dances to and fro,
And wrought their beaded robes of buffalo.
Day following upon day,
Saw but the panther crouched upon the limb,
Smooth serpents, swift and slim,
Slip through the reeds and grasses, and the bear
Crush through his tangled lair
Of chaparral, upon the startled prey!

"LISTEN, *how I have seen*
Flash of strange fires in gorge and black ravine;
Heard the sharp clang of steel, that came to drain
The mountain's golden vein—
And laughed and sang, and sang and laughed again,
Because that 'now,' I said, 'I shall be known!
I shall not sit alone;
But reach my hands unto my sister lands!
And they? Will they not turn
Old, wondering dim eyes to me, and yearn—
Aye, they will yearn, in sooth,
To my glad beauty, and my glad fresh youth!'

"WHAT *matters though the morn*
Redden upon my singing fields of corn!
What matters though the wind's unresting feet
Ripple the gold of wheat,
And my vales run with wine,
And on these hills of mine

The orchard boughs droop heavy with ripe fruit?
When with nor sound of lute
Nor lyre, doth any singer chant and sing
Me, in my life's fair spring:
The matin song of me in my young day?
But all my lays and legends fade away
From lake and mountain to the farther hem
Of sea, and there be none to gather them.

"Lo! I have waited long!
How longer yet must my strung harp be dumb,
Ere its great master come?
Till the fair singer comes to wake the strong,
Rapt chords of it unto the new, glad song!
Him a diviner speech
My song-birds wait to teach:
The secrets of the field
My blossoms will not yield
To other hands than his;

And, lingering for this,
My laurels lend the glory of their boughs
To crown no narrower brows.
For on his lips must wisdom sit with youth,
And in his eyes, and on the lids thereof,
The light of a great love—
And on his forehead, truth!" . . .

Was it the wind, or the soft sigh of leaves,
Or sound of singing waters? Lo, I looked,
And saw the silvery ripples of the brook,
The fruit upon the hills, the waving trees,
And mellow fields of harvest; saw the Gate
Burn in the sunset; the thin thread of mist
Creep white across the Saucelito hills;
Till the day darkened down the ocean rim,
The sunset purple slipped from Tamalpais,
And bay and sky were bright with sudden stars.

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